THE PRICE TAG OF FAITH
Luke 14:25-33
September 14, 1980

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I continue to be intrigued by the idea that you begin to live when you discover something for which you are willing to die. It is certainly not a new or novel idea. Jesus said it many ways, most pointedly in the observation that you will find your life by losing it. The idea first broke through to me in a brief prayer attributed to a Chinese student at Princeton Seminary in the Cold War Days..."O God, give us something to die for - and we will have something for which to live."

The idea runs through Robert Bolt's brilliant play "A Man For All Seasons". Thomas More, sixteenth century common law attorney, Chancellor of England, widely respected citizen, has come into conflict with Henry, his King, and shortly will be tried and convicted of treason, for refusing to sign an oath. Thomas More has not and will not speak against his King or his King's marriage or his King's claim of sovereignty over the church He simply will not sign an oath approving.Richard Rich is the ambitious young protagonist, who for his own political advancement will lie about Thomas More and give the King the reason he needs to execute him. Listen to a bit of early dialogue between these two radically different men...

"Rich: But every man has his price!
More: No - no - no.
Rich: But yes! In money too.
More: (With gentle impatience) No - no - no.
Rich: Or pleasure. Letters, women, bricks and mortar. There's always something.
More: Childish.
Rich: Well, in suffering, certainly.
More: (Interested) Buy a man with suffering?
Rich: Impose suffering, and offer him - escape.
More: Oh. For a moment I thought you were being more profound."
(Robert Bolt, A Man For All Seasons, cited by J.F.Bresnahau, Theology and Law, NICM Journal, Summer 1977, p.16).

Thomas More, that is to say, is thinking about suffering. He is intrigued, not by the possibility of more tangible rewards - money, power, prestige. His price may be something important enough to call for suffering. The playwright probes the human spirit deeply at this point, I believe. No one, ordinarily, chooses to suffer. But each of us knows, intuitively, that our salvation, our being, our fulfillment as persons, is somehow wrapped up in finding something for which we would suffer gladly if asked.

That is what Jesus taught one day in an incident reported in Luke's Gospel. Great crowds had begun to follow Jesus around the countryside. Significant numbers of people gathered wherever he went: some of them traveled with Him. One time, as Luke tells it, He turned around, presumably to this large crowd of following people and said, bluntly... "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

How could He say such a thing? Did He mean, literally, that following Him meant contradicting the highest instincts of our humanity - hating parents and children? Hardly. We know, intuitively, that it could not be. We know, intuitively, that religion that undercuts and destroys the basic relationships of our humanness is sick religion; that the cults which make the severing of biological ties the precondition of membership can become demonic. The scholars are helpful here. They point out that Semitic language

the Aramaic, which Jesus spoke - Hebrew, the language of religion - was extraordinarily vivid language, given to dramatic imagery. It was common, in Semitic language, for instance, to accentuate one idea by citing its opposite. "If you wish to love God, you have to hate your own parents." That's hyperbole, not precise ethical instruction. What He meant, obviously, is that faith is not a casual matter. Following Him would be a very costly enterprise involving real sacrifice and a painful reordering of priorities What He meant was that discipleship was far more profound than following a pleasant preacher around Galilee for a few weeks. It had to do with something so big and so important that everything else, even one's own life, paled in significance beside it. Jesus was asking people to give their lives away and there was no sense in softening that or disguising it.

Part of the problem we have with texts like this one is that not very many of us perceive Christian faith in those radically "either/or" terms. Not many of us sacrificed anything by deciding to follow Jesus. We didn't walk away from parents to become Christians: in fact, they dressed us up and bundled us into a church and had us baptized before we had much to say about the project. In fact, not only did we not reject our parents for the sake of our faith - the very opposite of that dynamic often happens. Sometimes people reject Christian faith in the process of rejecting or rebelling against parents. That's another story. The opening line of which goes "I don't come to church because my parents made me attend every week." That has more to do with Oedipus than Jesus, I think, and I'm always tempted to inquire whether the same dynamic applies to brushing teeth or eating breakfast. In any event, deciding to be a Christian, was not a terribly costly matter for most of us. Nor is belonging to the Christian Church a terribly demanding enterprise. We have grown accustomed to convenient Christianity. We do not want our religion to challenge our thinking, our values; we become indignant when our church uses terms like sacrificial giving. Frankly, the average price tag can be computed in terms of thirty or forty hours per year and several hundred dollars. And it's no wonder that we're astounded by these radical demands.

Yet, there have always been some people paying dearly for their faith. You know the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor - theologian, who wrote so movingly about The Cost of Discipleship in the thirties, and then paid the cost himself, in a Nazi concentration camp. You know, but probably not as immediately and personally and poignantly as I do about Christian men and women who heard the call of Jesus Christ himself in the Civil Rights Movement, and felt called, by Him, to make a stand and a statement about equal justice, and came home from their witness in Alabama, Mississippi and were shortly unemployed and unemployable. We need the reminder that Christian people are in trouble, today, because of their faith. Christianity may be a comfortable religion here, but that is not so elsewhere. A good friend of mine told me recently about a trip to Columbia several years ago. He was invited to meet a Catholic priest who, as is the case increasingly in South America, was in deep trouble for criticizing the government's treatment of the poor. The priest had gone to live among the poor and was teaching them how to make fertilizer out of garbage. My friend and his wife saw him, secretly, because the local police were looking for him. They talked about his ministry, the priest left, my friends returned to the United States. They learned later, that no one ever saw the priest again. They live with the possibility that their visit was somehow related to his disappearance. That story is not unusual today. At this moment the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, the Reverend Kao Chung-Ming, is in prison, along with other Taiwanese Christians, sentenced by a military court in June, to seven years, for hiding an anti-government dissident. Courageous Polish workers, on strike, defying their government and the grim tyranny looking over their government's shoulder, kneeling in prayer in the shipyard to Jesus Christ, not Karl Marx - demonstrated that the cost of faith and integrity and human dignity and decency continues to be very high in much of the world.

Newly elected Moderator of our General Assembly, Charles Hammond, said recently, "If you want to be a Christian martyr, then put Him at the center of your life... begin to preach through your action, and if the occasion arises, your words, and see what happens. I think you stand a good chance of becoming a Christian martyr, if not physically, certainly socially."

There is a lingering suspicion that if we're not paying a price, we have not yet really begun to follow Jesus Christ. There is a lingering suspicion that in order to be a Christian you have to submerge your own self, negate your own personhood. In Jesus' own rhetoric, "hate your own life " This, I believe, is the most critical juncture of Christian theology. Denying self is not an end in itself. Rather, we believe that authentic selfhood emerges when we decide to follow, when we choose Jesus Christ. The social scientists tell us that somewhere along the line we have to decide to be. For most of us that decision is made over against parents: most adolescents' rebellion is the normal and healthy dynamic of a person deciding to be a person. Rollo May says it clearly...

> "An assertion of the self, a commitment, is essential if the self is to have any reality. This is the distinction between human beings and the rest of nature. The acorn becomes an oak by means of automatic growth: no commitment is necessary. The kitten similarly becomes a cat on the basis of instinct...But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them. People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day." (The Courage to Create, p.5).

We become full human beings, that is to say, when from somewhere down inside ourselves, we decide to be, to become. We become fully human ourselves when we decide to give our lives to something or someone. That's a magnificent and moving thing to see happen in one's own children - to witness the first deep giving of self: to see a person begin to emerge as a youngster begins to give something of himself or herself...to a sport, or teacher, or school, or music. Particularly, the real human being in us emerges when we begin to live for someone else. May puts that exquisitely - "The essence of being human is that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things, in spite of the fact that time and death will claim us all." (Ibid,p.19).

Think about our deep choices - our dearest commitments...

> "I pledge allegiance to the flag...and to the Republic for which it stands
> "I take thee, to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful husband: In plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live."
> "Do you intend your child to be His disciple, to obey His word and show His love? Do you promise, in dependence on the grace of God, to bring up your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?"

Somewhere in the midst of those promises, those choices and commitments your personhood, your strength and particularity and individuality emerges. Somewhere in the process of giving itself away your life takes on meaning and worth. And one place further...

> "Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you intend to be His disciple and to show His love?"

The particularity of Christianity is precisely here. The highest, noblest expression of your humanity and mine emerges when we respond to Jesus Christ by committing everything we are to Him: by putting Him at the center: in whatever words we choose - to say and mean, "Lord - take my life." We are never more fully human, never more alive, than in that commitment.

Bonhoeffer realized that short of that we are, very simply, cheating ourselves. "By disguising the demand for total commitment," he said, "we are guilty of offering 'cheap grace'. Christianity without a cross, or in more mundane terms bargain basement religion

Bonhoeffer wrote, in words that were prophetic...

> "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go into the world. But it is the same death every time - death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call." (The Cost of Discipleship, p.79).

Perhaps we will not be asked to die, physically. Perhaps we will be asked for something which sometimes is more difficult...to persevere, to endure - to live faithfully in a skeptical, secular society: to live lovingly and forgivingly in a world that keeps forgetting how to love and forgive. Perhaps our call is to "hang in there" for Jesus Christ against boredom. William Willimon wrote recently in the Christian Century...

> "To be martyred by fire before screaming pagans is one way to pay for the faith, but I submit it's tough to pay, day by day, in a lonely, dull, ignored-by-pagans wilting that comes from waiting..." (8/13/80, p.782-3).

Perhaps it will be faithfulness to a spouse; loving when you don't want to. Perhaps it will be a reluctant but compelling commitment to justice - which appears on occasion to be a threat to the comfort of your status quo. Perhaps it will be the call of truth - or compassion - or love that forces you to release your grip a bit on a lifelong set of values and adopt new ones.

To follow Jesus Christ is a costly venture decision. The price tag - the bottom line - is your life, all of it. To be His man or woman is to pick up your cross and fall in behind Him. As you do that in your life, tentatively, please remember that He died on the Cross; and that therefore, it is not simply your burden but your salvation; that to pick it up and carry it is to be alive, fully alive.

Amen.

God eternal, forgive us for timid faith. Give us the courage to be your men and women, to follow your Son wherever He leads. Give us the strength we need; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.